

# Bill Darlison becomes resident



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# The INQUIRER

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**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

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*Creating chalices, a Youth Panel workshop. Photo by John Hewerdine*

## Inquiring Words

Often when we think of Peace, we dream of a world not at war, we dream of ridding the world of the weapons of war, we dream of eradicating injustice and inequality. And eventually we drown in the vastness of such a problem. How can we, living in our towns and villages take on such a vast quest, and we become disillusioned, we fall before the first hurdle because we cannot see over it.

And yet all our faith traditions and spiritual teachers tell us something different; we don't begin out there, solving the world's problems, we begin in here, in our hearts.

But for many that is the hardest peace to find because we have to face our inner world and the obstacles that prevent us finding peace in our hearts; our prejudices, our guilt, the unforgiven acts that form our past; both those done to us and those done by us. And so to protect us from facing our realities we turn to try and sort out other people's issues, the warring world and the lack of peace in their lives and the societies of others: Much easier to solve than our own.

What prevents peace and love entering your heart?

In a few moments of prayer and meditation, reflect upon this question.

What prevents you from finding peace in your heart?

*Words from the General Assembly Peace Vespers by the Rev Chris Goacher*



### With thanks

This full-colour issue of *The Inquirer* was sponsored by the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

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# 'I always wanted to be pope'



'I'd like to be a bridge between the different spiritual factions within our own movement – Unitarian Christians, Unitarian Humanists, Earth-Spirit Unitarians and the like – helping us all to see that our diversity is a mark of our uniqueness as a denomination and a testimony to our belief that there are many ways to God.'

– Bill Darlison, left, with Marion Baker, 2013-14 vice president of the GA

## By Bill Darlison

(This is the address Bill Darlison gave on his appointment as GA president.)

On an October evening in 1958 I stood waiting for a bus to take me to St. Joseph's church in Pontefract to serve the 7.30pm mass. Pope Pius XII had just died, and the newspapers and news bulletins on television and radio were giving details of the conclave of cardinals that was to meet in Rome to appoint a new pope. As I stood there at the bus stop – a youth barely 13 years old – I thought that maybe one day in the distant future, I could be pope. I had the right credentials: I was male, I was Catholic, and I was precociously and annoyingly religious.

Those thoughts have come back to me every time a new pope has been elected – there have been five papal election since that one in 1958 – and I have had to smile at my youthful naivety and to thank God that my clerical aspirations in Catholicism ended when they did. I never made it to pope, I never made it to priest, and I'm glad. But I have made it to President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches – a position I never even knew existed until I was nearly 50 years old, and which I never coveted even then. And when my friends and acquaintances hear about this, they often ask, 'Is that like being pope?' 'Will you be the Unitarian pope?'

## Not quite a Unitarian pope

Not quite the same, I have to explain. For a start, the pope usually takes on the job for life. He generally holds down the position until he's gaga. On the other hand, the Unitarian president does the job for one year only, and may already be gaga before he (or she) begins. Consequently, although there are now two popes, there are at least 25 people still alive who've been Unitarian president. Indeed, when I attended the induction of the Rev Nicky Jenkins in Chorlton a few weeks ago, there were four ex-presidents in the congregation. On *Have I Got News for You* last week, the comedian Richard Osman said that if Pope Francis were to resign and yet another pope be elected, there would be enough popes and ex-popes to form a boy band. We've got enough presidents and ex-presidents to

form a small orchestra!

When a pope is elected, white smoke rises from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel. When a GA president is appointed a collective sigh of relief rises from the weary members of the Executive Committee who are happy that they've found someone daft enough to take on the job. When Pope Francis was enthroned, thousands upon thousands of people from all around the world flocked into St Peter's Square in Rome. Here in Nottingham people have come from afar too – Bradford! Pontefract! Wakefield! (and Dublin!) – and no doubt many of our congregational delegates have already gone home (as I have done on numerous occasions in the past).

In addition, the world pays attention to popes because popes have power. The pope is considered to be the Vicar of Christ on earth, God's premier representative, the successor of St. Peter, with the power to bind and loose, a power so formidable that whenever he speaks *ex cathedra* – from the chair of St Peter – his utterances are thought to be infallible. St Augustine summed it up 15 centuries ago: *Roma locuta est; causa finita est* – Rome has spoken, the case is closed.

## The president has spoken, so what?

However, Unitarian presidents don't have any power at all. (Who does have any power in Unitarianism?) The Unitarian president can say what he likes but no one will pay any more attention to him than to anyone else in the movement. In fact, we might say, 'The president has spoken. So what? Let's continue the discussion.' And this is exactly as it should be.

However, there are two papal titles which are appropriate for our denominational president: the first is *Pontifex Maximus* – Bridge Builder in Chief. The president is the one who tries to build bridges where none exist, to repair bridges which have fallen into disrepair, and to maintain bridges that are doing their job well. I would like to help maintain those bridges that exist already among our denomination and the various faith groups in Britain and Ireland and try to build new ones where I can. I see the president as a bridge between the Executive Committee and the Officers in Essex Hall, and the congregations throughout the country. I'd like to be a bridge between

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# From the Khasi Hills to the Cenotaph

By Lis Dyson-Jones

*(This is a transcript of the address Lis Dyson-Jones gave on stepping down as Unitarian General Assembly president.)*

I can't possibly describe to you the variety of experiences I've had and shared during the past year and as you can read in the Annual report, my visiting schedule, like all presidents before me, has been extensive. I've been able to visit all 16 districts during the anniversary year of the Great Ejection and have been invited back to some, more than once. It has been people, situations and occasions which have mattered most.

All of these visits have been different: there has been joy and sorrow and I have shared laughter and tears; a lot of singing and mountains of food. So much warm hospitality and I now publicly thank all who gave it so generously. There have also been a few grumbles (but not many) – and why not – there may have been genuine cause on one or two occasions.

## President knows more than most

Like presidents before me I have visited healthy and growing congregations and some where only a handful of loyal and true members keep the Unitarian flag flying, in buildings where love and care oozes from the polished pews. I have witnessed just how hard some people work and how important their church or chapel is to them. I am thankful for the support I have received from the staff at our headquarters and am particularly indebted to the Chief Officer and I can never thank enough my close friends and my nearest and dearest for all their support.

Someone said to me very recently that during the year of office a GA President probably knows more about the movement than anyone else. Now I'm not suggesting that I know everything nor that I'm someone who thinks they do, because I don't and never will, but I have met and come to know many people and situations during the past year and I realise (if I hadn't realised before), we are all different but our Unitarian values are strong!

I have tried to do the best I could and know that I have made mistakes; I worked as hard as I am able and have become very close friends with my computer! I have sent and received hundreds of emails and thankfully, I haven't (to my knowledge anyway) sent an email to the wrong person by mistake. Not like the husband of a friend of mine did recently...

She and her husband live not too far from me in Wales and because of the very cold winter we have had, decided to celebrate their wedding anniversary somewhere warm. So they



Chairing the meetings had its moments. Lis Dyson-Jones with Chief Officer Derek McAuley. Photo by John Hewerdine

planned to stay in the south of Spain where they had spent their honeymoon, 35 years ago. They managed to book at the same hotel but because of their busy work schedules it was difficult to co-ordinate their travel arrangements. So the husband travelled a day before my friend, his wife and after a good journey, he arrived in a very warm and sunny Spain and checked into the hotel. He found there was a computer in the bedroom and decided to send an email to his wife. However, he accidentally left out one letter in her email address and without realising his error, sent the email.



Lis Dyson-Jones greeted a midwife while representing British Unitarians on a trip to the Khasi Hills.

## A 'hellish' mistake

Meanwhile, somewhere in Birmingham, a widow had just returned home from her husband's funeral. He was a Baptist minister who had been called home to glory following a heart attack.

The widow decided to check her email expecting to find messages from friends and relatives. After reading the first message she screamed and fainted.

Her son rushed into the room, found his mother on the floor and saw the computer screen which read:

*To: My loving wife*

*Subject: I've arrived*

*I know you're surprised to hear from me. They have computers here now and you're allowed to send emails to family. I've just arrived and been checked in.*

*I've seen that everything has been prepared for your arrival tomorrow. I'm looking forward to seeing you then. Hope your journey is as uneventful as mine was.*

*P.S. Be prepared – it's very hot down here!*

I am so thankful that I didn't have any journeys like that! But in November last year I was able to represent the denomination at the Service of Remembrance at the Cenotaph in Whitehall and witness a British spectacle first hand. My visit to the Khasi Hills in February was truly amazing and literally took my breath away. I was honoured to attend the ceremonies surrounding the closing celebrations of the 113<sup>th</sup> Annual Meetings of the Unitarian Union of North East India and the coinciding 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Unitarian witness in North East India. I was able to present GA Citations to several Unitarians in honour of their work at the Kharang Rural Centre and I was doubly honoured to be invited to close the UUNEI Annual Meetings. Standing before and speaking to 3000+ Unitarians was an experience I will never forget.

It was in the Khasi Hills that I experienced, along with my son and daughter who accompanied me, amazing hospitality –

*(Continued on next page)*



# Without any stop-offs in computer hell

(Continued from previous page)

and the welcome I received there was a spiritual happening. I experienced that human exchange of giving and receiving; that spiral or circle where you can't tell where one begins and one ends. Hospitality: more than the smiling and the greeting; more than food and shelter – like the story of Abraham welcoming strangers into his tent – I received true open tent hospitality; love which was spread and shared; a celebration of a beloved community.

Now I am at the end of my presidential journey and all its experiences, I am left with feelings of hope. 'Hope – that which is the opposite of despair; Hope, the state which promotes belief in an outcome, a feeling that *what is wanted and needed* can be had. Hope – the act of looking forward to something with reasonable confidence – an expectation.

## Hope takes risks

But hope doesn't exist in isolation. It involves imagination, team work and taking risks. It requires a goal, an outcome and that requires willpower. That driving force of hopeful thinking and realistic roadmaps which will guide hopeful thought. Hope requires pathways to enable thoughts to move to an intended goal. Optimism leads us to expect the best but doesn't necessarily provide critical thinking about *how* that goal can be achieved.

We talk a lot about increase and growth, but we should also talk about our fear of change. We must have strong confident expectation that our number will grow but we must not rely on miracles.

Some have asked why there is a need for change – we're ok as we are? Well if you are a caterpillar which enjoys eating your way through whatever plant suits you, (then) by all means, stay there. After all, caterpillars can move and crawl, but remember, butterflies can fly! They change from caterpillar to butterfly and are not afraid and it is their *metamorphosis* which allows for growth. We are great at looking back as we ponder why growth in our number slides. What we forget is that the founders of our movement were not afraid of change and we



Lis Dyson-Jones stepping down, with Bill Darlison. Photo by John Hewerdine

are foolish if we don't follow their example; not necessarily in the same way, but moving in the 'now'.

## Spiritual renewal lies at the edge

Many have said that as Unitarians we are on the edge and some mean 'on the edge of falling off'. That is not my interpretation of being on the edge. At the edge we see horizons denied to those who stay in the middle. The 'edge' is in fact, where boundaries are stretched and is the centre of spiritual renewal.

Unitarianism is a way of life and so let us make it so and stop thinking we know all the answers. Let us learn and move forward by 'doing' as well as 'being'. We can redefine what we are and not fear change. We need metamorphosis to drive us out of our old routine and we can use metamorphosis to change attitudes. We are the authors of our lives and our best ideas are bigger than all of us.

*Lis Dyson-Jones gave this address at the close of her Unitarian General Assembly presidency.*

# Not a pope, a bridge-builder president

(Continued from page 3)

the different spiritual factions within our own movement – Unitarian Christians, Unitarian Humanists, Earth-Spirit Unitarians and the like – helping us all to see that our diversity is a mark of our uniqueness as a denomination and a testimony to our belief that there are many ways to God.

## Time to build bridges

We need to build bridges, too, between the different age groups within our movement, between the young and innovative and the older and more cautious. I have been amazed and humbled in my vice presidential year to experience the pioneering spiritual activities of our younger members at such gatherings as Summer School in Great Hucklow, and the FUSE conference in Worthing, and to see the loving dedication given by those older people who have devoted decades of their lives to Unitarian witness, and to the restoration and maintenance of our beautiful churches and chapels throughout the country. These two groups are not by any means mutually

exclusive, but sensitivity to both, bridges between both, are essential.

The second significant papal title is one that sounds a little odd when used of incumbents of the papacy: *servus servorum dei* – the servant of the servants of God. It was certainly not this one that inspired my clerical ambitions on that autumn day in 1958, and it doesn't seem to be uppermost in the minds of the popes who allow themselves to be carried around in a sedan chairs and who hold out their hands so that the faithful can kiss their episcopal ring. (I have hopes that Pope Francis may be an exception to this.)

## Being the servant of the servants of God

But the president of the General Assembly must be the servant of the servants of God, one who acts without the need for pomp and pageantry, and who humbly serves the denomination with no thought of personal aggrandisement.

I am very proud to have been chosen as the denomination's Builder of Bridges and Servant of Servants. It is my fervent prayer that I can fulfil these two roles in the coming year.



# Why do you want to be a minister?

By Kenneth Smith

Five first-year students in training for the Unitarian ministry gave their own answers to this question at a General Assembly meeting organised by the National Unitarian Fellowship.

As Jo James, studying at Harris Manchester College Oxford (HMCO) remarked in his own contribution, he had been posed the question with the vocal emphasis placed on almost every word in the sentence!

Anna Jarvis, studying at Unitarian College Manchester (UCM) saw ministry as having three main aspects – the pastoral, the priestly and the prophetic. The pastoral involved standing alongside people especially in times of struggle, the priestly aspect involved helping the community to do this and the prophetic role involved declaring the divine spirit to others, although this was a function not exclusively for the minister but extended to a ‘prophet-hood of all believers’.

Whereas Anna had been drawn to ministry aged 18 but had been advised to ‘go away and live a little’, Maria Curtis (UCM student) encountered Unitarianism relatively recently after a



*Anna Jarvis spoke of the pastoral, the priestly and the prophetic purposes of ministry. Photo by John Hewerdine*

career in social work and the caring professions. She found a spiritual home at Brighton Unitarian church as an ‘evangelical atheist’ and had gradually become involved in leading worship. She saw her ministry training as a transfer of many of the skills she had acquired in her previous career.

Jo James had enjoyed a career in experimental theatre and drew parallels between what the style of work involved there – small scale, radical and provocative – and his future role in ministry. In the theatre he had offered cultural resistance to the

‘spirit of the times’ and saw ministry as offering ‘spiritual resistance’ to the same prevailing spirit. He believed it was important for ministry to ‘live in and through the questions’ that faced people and not to close down with answers that were necessarily incomplete.

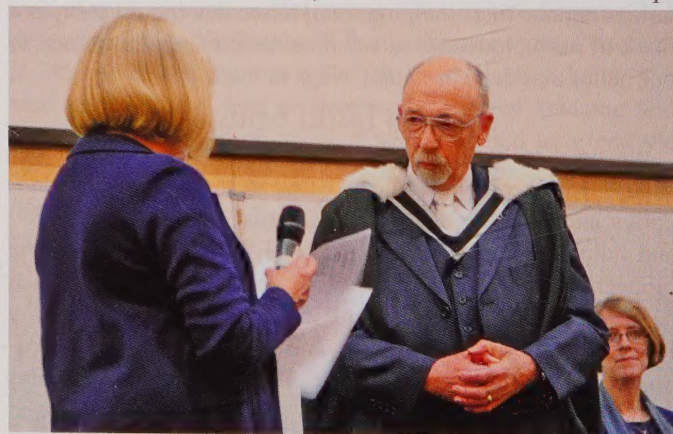
Matthew Smith (HMCO) saw ministry as a collaborative effort – ‘it is what we all do together’ and emphasised the importance of the church as a place of unconditional welcome, a space where ‘labels come last’.

Ralph Catts (UCM) outlined some of his personal history of coming from the evangelical Christian background he rejected, and diverse spiritual experiences en route which led him to Unitarianism in the USA and his delight in a UUA service celebrating the music of Louis Armstrong. He saw the sharing of joys and concerns as an important part of worship and looked forward to the chance of using modern communications like Skype to pioneer virtual meeting in worship.

The audience were deeply impressed by the obvious commitment and sincerity which all the students were bringing to their preparation for ministry. The emergence of ministers of this calibre should be a cause for optimism about the future development of our denomination.

To see a video of the presentations, see: <http://bit.ly/17txIAH>

*Kenneth Smith is secretary National Unitarian Fellowship.*



*The Rev Cliff Reed was honoured at the Anniversary Service on his retirement following many years of ministry. Photo by John Hewerdine*

Harris Manchester College  
Oxford

## ANNUAL MEETING OF FRIENDS and HONORARY GOVERNORS

Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2013

12 noon Reception

12.30pm Lunch

2.00pm AGM

3.00pm Lecture:

Alister McGrath “Irrigating Deserts:  
CS Lewis on the Place of Education in  
Modern Culture”

4.00pm Tea

5.00pm Valedictory Service for Christopher  
Coyne and Lewis Rees

Please inform the Bursary by June 15<sup>th</sup> if  
you wish to attend the lunch:

01865 271006,

or email [conferences@hmc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:conferences@hmc.ox.ac.uk)



# Watch out – Doris has got a bit cross

Now I'm really cross

I went to the GA and it was great, it always is. Well, I do have the odd moment when I reach for my machete but you can put that down to my general grumpiness.

But what has made me really spectacularly cross is that, by my calculations, 95 congregations did not send a delegate.

*Upper Pocklington Unitarian Church: we never send a delegate. It's too expensive and what has the GA ever done for Us? Besides the chairwoman and the secretary play bridge on a Friday afternoon and the treasurer can't leave Jimbo.*

We debated two very important motions, one – assisted dying – which was postponed from last year so that congregations could have more time to debate the issue and the other asking for a Royal Commission to look into the efficacy of the current UK legislation with regard to drugs.

*Assisted dying, euthanasia more like. And legalisation of drugs. We'll none of us be safe in our beds.*

There were two other motions, less contentious, about the respect for all living things and one asking for congregations to hold an interfaith peace service on World Peace on the third Sunday in October.

*We want nothing to do with animals, apart from Jimbo, of course. And we certainly don't want all sorts of strangers coming into our chapel.*

And then there were the workshops, always a problem this as you often find you want to go to two being held at the same time.

*Workshops. Lots of people talking about things they know nothing about. Getting into groups. Writing things on*



*flipcharts. What has any of that got to do with Unitarianism?*

And then there is the worship, short morning devotions and short introductions to the plenary sessions.

*All modern happy-clappy stuff no doubt and hymns from the PURPLE BOOK which we don't hold with at all. Hymns of Worship has served us well these many years.*

And then, of course, there is all the inter-meeting, over meals, over coffee socialising. Meeting old friends, making new.

*We don't need to meet new people, we have all the contacts we need right here in Upper Pocklington.*

There was the Opening Ceremony with various congregations talking about the innovative ways they have grown their chapels.

*Huh. Not a mention of Flo or Jo among them. All airy-fairy stuff with not a drop of true Unitarianism anywhere. Never mind Christmas sing-alongs, get out the Orders of Service.*

What about the truly fabulous Talent Show?

*A lot of people showing off when they should have been in bed.*

*Dorothy Haughton is a worship leader in the Midlands.*

## ICUU: Meet the Unitarian bishop

By Celia Midgley

What a delight it was to welcome, as a special guest at our GA Annual Meetings, the Rev Bálint Benczédi Ferenc, Bishop of the United Hungarian Unitarian Church. Accompanied by the Rev Pap Mária, he charmed and educated us with his presentation of words and pictures describing the church's past struggles and present growth and vitality.

Introduced by Chief Officer Derek McAuley at the presentation of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU), the Bishop recalled how, after meeting the Rev Bill McMillan 40 years ago, he had longed to visit England. Now he was here, apologising for his 'poor English', yet communicating very effectively with his audience his personal story and that of the church. Both had known sadness and struggle, but the rebirth of the Hungarian Unitarian Church signalled hope and renewed strength in both Hungary and Transylvania.

The Bishop did not dwell on the church's 16th century beginnings. Those who wished to hear about Dávid Ferenc, the radical Reformation and the links with Biandrata and Servetus could read Professor Kovács Sándor's booklet *A Short History of the Hungarian Unitarian Church (Transylvania)*, distributed at the close of the presentation. The more recent past, however, was mentioned. Four decades of Communist oppression had placed strictures on church activity, reduced



Bishop Bálint Benczédi Ferenc

to little more than preaching. Church properties were confiscated by the state, spies were everywhere reporting to the secret police and the shadow of the past was slow to clear; since 1989 much effort had been put into regaining ownership of schools and other property.

As the Bishop spoke, a series of pictures on the screen showed the present vitality of the church, with much and varied activity in its congregations and fellowships, youth

events, ministerial meetings, pilgrimages and gatherings for education, worship and festivity. We saw pictures of high schools, a retirement home for older people and the Protestant Theological Institute in Kolozsvár where 21 students are currently in training for the ministry. There is also a strong women's organisation and, we learned, women are assuming much more leadership in the church than in the last decade.

This was no sombre presentation, which some might have anticipated. It was upbeat and lively. We are grateful to Bishop Ferenc and the Rev Mária for sharing with us the story of the Hungarian Unitarian Church today, and for reminding us that we are brothers and sisters on this our journey of faith.

*The Rev Celia Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister and is a member of the Executive Committee of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists.*







# GA 2013







Participants in the Anniversary Service included (l-r) back row: Chief Officer Derek McAuley, the Revs Feargus O'Connor, Jim Corrigan, Lewis Rees and Sarah Tinker. Front row: the Revs Cliff Reed and Nicky Jenkins; GA President Lis Dyson-Jones, the Revs Sheena Gabriel and Sue Woolley. This photo and the one on page 11 are by John Hewerdine.

## Remembering the interdependent web

*This is the transcript of the sermon given by the Rev Feargus O'Connor at the Anniversary Service held at the Unitarian General Assembly meetings.*

The renowned American Unitarian minister Theodore Parker often told the story of a childhood incident he remembered all his life. Walking home one day he saw a pond and, nearby, some rare flowers in bloom. He stopped to enjoy the scene and saw, innocently basking in the sun, a spotted tortoise.

'I lifted the stick I had in my hand to strike the harmless reptile; for, though I had never killed any creature, yet I had seen other boys out of sport destroy birds, squirrels, and the like, and I felt a disposition to follow their wicked example. But all at once something checked my little arm, and a voice within me said, clear and loud, "It is wrong!"'

I held my uplifted stick in wonder at the new emotion. I hastened home and told the tale to my mother, and asked what it was that told me it was wrong. She wiped a tear from her eye with her apron, and, taking me in her arms, said: "Some call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul. If you listen and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey, then it will fade out little by little, and leave you ... without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice..."

### The still, small voice inspires

That still small voice has inspired many of us to deeds of practical compassion and empathy, not only for suffering humanity but all God's creatures who share this planet with us.

Empathy, connection, giving of ourselves whenever and wherever we can, showing kindness: these are the qualities of spirit that deepen and enrich us through the people and animals we meet on our life journey.

To live fulfilled lives, really meaningful lives, we must always be prepared to walk in someone else's shoes. If you can be in touch with feelings not for but *with* another living being, as Rabbi Hillel said in a famous story, 'all the rest is commentary'.

These ways of trying to live are the abiding values that speak to our deepest spiritual instincts, the values that stir us to social action, qualities in us that can turn dark into light and despair into hope.

Endeavouring, and sometimes struggling, to do good, sometimes succeeding but often failing to make a difference: is this not the very essence of what it means to be 'religious'?

What is it that leads women like Clara Barton to minister to the dying and wounded on both sides of the battlefield during the American Civil War and later to found the American Red Cross?

In the 19th century Dorothea Dix was a Unitarian pioneer of care for the mentally ill. Through her campaigning, her nursing, her therapy and the provision of books, music and recreation for her patients she showed us the world can be blessed by individuals who have this special quality: an instinct to care.

In spite of the many demands on her time, what instinct stirred in Dorothea Dix, going about her work as Superintendent of US Army Nurses, to even notice overworked and parched horses in Boston? Dorothea did not pass by but instead erected a fountain where these poor horses could rest and drink.

### Our values stir us to social action

Theodore Parker might echo his mother's words: 'Some call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul'.

As Unitarians, we each have our own understanding of 'God'. Some Unitarian humanists I know are fond of inserting an extra 'o'. Many see God in the beauty of the garden, the trees and the sacredness of Nature, in birdsong, in the granite and in the rose. Through all these many ways we come to deepen our sense of the mystery within and the mystery beyond as we find ways to live together in harmony in the world. May we recognise that we are each a part of something greater than ourselves. In that recognition we are taking the first step to embrace that mystery.



# Unitarian faith calls on us to care

Our journey of the spirit surely begins with aspiring to better understand our human condition? It begins in our working in whatever ways we can to acknowledge and nurture the worth and dignity of all beings.

As Unitarian communities of people with open hearts as well as open minds our message to the world, as a radical and freethinking religion of heart and head, is today as relevant as it has always been. It is a vision that offers hope over despair, courage over fear, understanding over prejudice, universal kinship over separation. Throughout human history the path of organised religion has all too often been one of dogmatism, control and political power. Who is within and who is cast out?

By concentrating on dogma and becoming fixated with religious labels the eternal questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives and our engagement with other living beings and the Earth are lost.

In her poem, *The Summer Day*\* Mary Oliver asks: 'Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?'

It does matter what we do with that 'one wild and precious life'. What we do or leave undone in the world affects us all because we are, each one of us, part of the interdependent web of all existence. It is that feeling of interconnectedness that gives us hope even when we witness the darker side of humankind.

It has been said that we Unitarians believe in 'original virtue'. I like that. Perhaps it was something of that 'original virtue' that inspired the Abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe to take 'the side of the weak against the strong', in her advocacy both of oppressed slaves and of exploited animals.

It was that same still small voice that led the Unitarian Henry Bergh to found the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and co-found the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

He saw the foundation of his animal protection society not as mere sentimentality but as a 'matter purely of conscience ... a moral question in all its aspects ... Mercy to animals means mercy to [humankind].'

## Aspiring to universal kinship

They are words that might be used about another Unitarian who gave a voice to the voiceless: Frances Power Cobbe. An indomitable Irishwoman, argumentative and a doughty campaigner for women's and children's rights, Frances, as one admirer put it, 'gave her time to Theists, to workhouse inmates and to women, but she gave herself to animals'. With the humanitarian reformer Lord Shaftesbury she set up the world's first anti-vivisection society and spent her last 30 years campaigning in defence of laboratory animals.

I hope that she would approve of the work that Unitarians are doing today through the Universal Kinship Fund to support advances in scientific knowledge without experiments on living animals. Through just this one small act we are making a choice to strengthen that interdependent web of which we are all a part.

Like Frances, we weave our presence into the world, wheth-



The Rev Feargus O'Connor

er it's recycling to help save the planet or buying fair trade produce: we weave our web of interdependence.

Just as Charlie, a border collie, does when he visits the North Wales Cancer Centre as a 'Pets as Therapy' dog. Charlie connects with the people in the room because he himself is receiving treatment for cancer. His owner Jane tells us: 'When patients stroke Charlie and find out what he has been through you do see a sense of empathy from them both.' A truly engaged spiritual connection like this surely comes from wisdom, insight,

empathy and compassion? Are these not the ideals to which we Unitarians should aspire?

It was Anna Sewall, the Quaker author of *Black Beauty*, who wrote: 'There is no religion without love ... people may talk as much as they like about their religion, but if it does not teach them to be good and kind to [animals] as well as [people] it is all a sham...'

## Authentic spirituality is not only in church

But where do we find that authentic spirituality? For Rabbi Lionel Blue it's seeing the hospital as a seminary. 'It's the kindness from nurses which has helped me as much as technology and I hope that doesn't get lost in the system'. He remembers the empathy of the Irish nurse as she chirps 'Well, me poor darlin', let's see if we can get you goin' today.'

For all the technology, which we do need, it is the connection to a caring voice and a cat's lick that help create the universal kinship for which we long. That spiritual practice of empathy and our journey towards greater interconnectedness with all living beings must remain for all of us a work in progress. These spiritual lessons are indeed hard for us to learn and do not come without sacrifice.

Though there are as many Unitarian approaches to spirituality as there are Unitarians, we gather as one to bring propositions for discussion, to sing, to listen. We gather because we feel compelled to care for humanity, for animals, for the planet, for future generations. Whether it's about reverence for our planet Earth and all living creatures who share it with us or how to reach out to people who are terminally ill, we strive, each in our own way, to heal our fractured world.

Should we not act together to realise the vision of the compassionate world, that land of heart's desire, for which the Unitarian writer Anna Laetitia Barbauld so yearned?

'The well-taught philosophic mind  
To all compassion gives,  
Casts round the world an equal eye  
And feels for all that lives.'

As individual souls, touched by the mystery within and the mystery beyond, in our communities, in the wider world, in each waking hour of our daily lives, may we be always conscious of these precious connections and vital contributions that we each make to the Universal Web of Life of which we are all a part.

\*To read Mary Oliver's full poem, 'The Summer Day' see [www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html](http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html)

The Rev Feargus O'Connor is minister at Golders Green.



# USPS: Have we all been here before?

By Jo Rogers

Roy Stemman is an investigative journalist specialising in most aspects of the paranormal. He is chairman of *Psychic News* and has edited his own magazine, but now focuses on writing books. Roy was a lead investigator in a TV documentary, *Back from the Dead*, exploring the Druze community. He has also contributed to many other TV and Radio programmes and debates on past lives.

Around 70 people attended his fascinating, well-illustrated and somewhat controversial talk. Roy began by reminding us that in general the traditional Christian church 'disapproves' of reincarnation and rebirth, whereas many Eastern religions including Hinduism and Buddhism see it as an integral part of existence.

Roy spent time in the late 90s with the Druze in Beirut. The Druze are an Islamic sect which goes back more than 1400 years, and with whom reincarnation is a fundamental teaching. Perhaps more surprising is that they believe rebirth in another physical body is instantaneous with death. The Druze leader said, 'We are Unitarians!' – they dislike the name 'Druze'.

A number of children there can remember past lives; a Lebanese paediatrician found that some disturbed patients had had previous lives which 'interfered' with their present life. He also had one patient whom he had treated in her previous life – she gave him her previous name – which he had on record.

Roy referred us to the work of Ian Stevenson, a psychiatrist who wrote many books on reincarnation, including 'Reincarnation and Biology', a work of two volumes each of which contains over 1000 pages of illustrated case studies.

Complex family relationships can result from this belief – e.g. one girl had been mother of a (much older) son and daughter, and had been wife to a 90-something-year-old who was

still alive. Roy showed us photographs of this family. Children were often able to give details of names, places and events relating to previous lives – people and places unknown/unheard of to them in their present life but which were proved to be authentic.

Birthmarks may well coincide with the mark of the cause of previous death. A girl born with badly malformed legs was found to have been a man who had died by having his legs tied and being thrown down a well. (One does not necessarily reincarnate in the same sex). Another example was that of a boy born with a bleeding scar on his neck. It transpired that in his previous life he had shot himself in order to escape from the police. Later someone suggested that, if this were so, he might have an 'exit scar' where the bullet came out. Sure enough, hidden in his hair was a scar resembling just that. Verifiable memories of the children coincided with such physical defects.

Question-time brought up other interesting points. Roy said that aptitudes, skills and habits were much less likely to show up in a new reincarnation than were the physical defects seemingly brought about by trauma. Are people most likely to be reborn in the same general locality? Most commonly, yes, but Roy told us of two Burmese sisters who remembered being Japanese pilots in the war. They liked raw fish, played war games and liked wearing military clothes.

Most cases of reincarnation come from the East where reincarnation is believed in and viewed positively. This begs the question as to whether apparent reincarnation is *caused* by this belief or whether we in the West, by discouraging and dismissing any such 'memories' a child may have, are missing out on a crucial truth.

*Jo Rogers is a member of the Unitarian Society for  
Psychical Studies.*

## Women's League supports charities

By Susan Wildman

The Unitarian Women's League held its 105th AGM without their President, Ann Harrison, who was unable to attend due to family illness. Barbara Clifford, Past President, stood in for Ann and chaired a successful meeting, during which a revised Constitution was passed. Work on this Constitution had been done by Ann Harrison, Susan Holt and Marion Baker. Barbara and John Clifford were thanked by the Secretary, Susan Wildman, for the production of the League Letter which cements the branches together. The accounts were presented by Susan Holt. Mary Wightman was thanked for organising the 2012 Rally, held at Martin Luther King House, Manchester. Barbara read out the President's message in her absence and Sheilah Stott proposed a vote of thanks and a card of appreciation was sent to Ann. We are looking forward to seeing a video of her travels throughout the UK.

A cheque for £14,400 was handed over to the Rev Peter Godfrey for 'Send a Child to Hucklow' for which Peter gave grateful thanks. Much of the money had been raised by WL members but Matthew Henry's Chapel, Chester had made a contribution of £6,500 to the final amount. Eunice Smith, Project Treasurer was thanked for her work.

Joan McFarlane was installed as National President for 2012/13 and Sheilah Stott as President elect. The incoming president then introduced Karen Friett, Executive Officer of



*The Rev Peter Godfrey accepts a cheque for 'Send a Child to Hucklow' from Barbara Clifford of the Women's League. Photo by John Hewerdine*

the Lymphoedema Support Network (LSH). Karen gave an excellent illustrated talk on Lymphoedema, which affects at least 100,000 men, women, and children in the UK. When lymph gland fluid is unable to drain away swelling occurs in the body, it cannot be cured, but usually it can be managed and improved. LSH is the League project for 2013/14.

Several people were thanked for contributions to the meeting including the pianist, Richard Merrick, and small pots of daffodils were presented. We remembered absent friends and sent some cards to those not present.

All in all it was an enjoyable meeting.  
*Susan Wildman is secretary of the Unitarian Women's League.*



# Climbing aboard the 'Peace Train'

By Feergus O'Connor

Speaking at the International Association of Religious Freedom, this lively and well-received talk by the Rev Chris Hudson was appropriately entitled *Resolving Conflict and Inclusiveness*.

Chris is indeed a rare bird in Irish religious and political life. From the home city of Yeats, O'Casey, Joyce and Beckett and hailing from a Nationalist Catholic family, he is a Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland minister working in Belfast and proclaiming our Unitarian values throughout Ireland and far beyond.

Respected on both sides of the border as an indefatigable peacemaker and bridge builder, Chris has acted as a link between Loyalist paramilitaries and the Irish Government. As a troubleshooter who has intervened on many occasions to help keep the peace and prevent renewed sectarian conflict stirred up by political extremists on both sides, he is often featured in the media and is arguably the best known Unitarian minister in Ireland.

Chris was one of the key people who laid the foundations of the historic 'Good Friday Agreement', overwhelmingly supported by the Irish electorate, North and South and one of the few conflict resolution agreements in recent times which, in Chris's words, 'has stuck and is working'. We think of the recent flag protests and sporadic sectarian violence but despite all the efforts of Republican and Loyalist ultras to derail it the peace process has lasted for over 15 years.

Chris's approach is one of deep listening, keeping everyone in the proverbial peace tent or 'Peace Train': a reference to the actual train which runs from Dublin to Belfast and brought peace campaigners together from both sides of the border – a journey he himself has followed both geographically and symbolically.

'In 1989 a number of people, including myself, started the Peace Train Movement, which initially was opposed to the bombing of the Dublin/Belfast railway line. The Peace Train



The Revs Chris Hudson and Celia Midgley  
Photo by John Hewerdine

was literally an event: running a train between Dublin and Belfast. However we gave a platform to many others to speak out against the use of violence for political change in a democratic society. The Peace Train became a metaphor for the Peace Process, used by amongst others Tony Blair. To continue our progress it is imperative that we continue the implementation of the peace process and try to keep everyone on board.'

Chris spoke of many aspects of active peacemaking, including the possibility of an Irish truth and reconciliation commission on the South African model. He does not underestimate the political difficulties but remains optimistic that with mutual goodwill 'where there is a will there is a way'.

The important thing is that, despite all these extremist formers of sectarian conflict from both Republican and Loyalist sides, the peace, supported by the people of Ireland, North and South, in historic votes, has held. It is surely thanks to the courage and bold initiatives of peacemakers like Chris who have put their lives and reputations on the line that the peace has actually endured.

Unitarians in these islands can be justly proud of Chris Hudson and the IARF is fortunate that he is an active member of its Peace Commission, the creation of another bold bridge builder, the UUA's Rev Richard Boeke, himself so active as an international Unitarian interfaith and peace ambassador.

On a lighter note: Chris recalled two encounters with the Rev Dr Ian Paisley, himself an unlikely peacemaker. Knowing Chris became a Unitarian from a Dublin Catholic background, the former Northern Ireland First Minister declared that this was 'a good move' in the right direction. When asked to sponsor him (when voluntarily incarcerated for charity) 'get out of jail' Paisley told him that, as Chris was a Unitarian, he would pay to keep him inside!

*The Rev Feergus O'Connor is minister at Golders Green.*

## 'Simple Gifts' are those freely given, received

By Anne Bodman

'Being gay, my mother, Bengali women in London ... and you', an intriguing title for the Unitarian Women's Group session at the GA, given by Rob Gregson, the programme director of 'Simple Gifts', a Unitarian Centre for Social action, based in Bethnal Green, East London.

Rob made it abundantly clear that women have been central to his thinking and motivation in the field of social action.

When Rob and his team were challenged in their first project which for various reasons did not get off the ground, he remembered his mother's words of encouragement, 'You have tried something, do not give up now, find out what is really needed, and continue with your vision'. This is exactly what they did and now have developed a centre which meets the needs of the surrounding community.

Rob also paid tribute to the feminist movement which did much to publicise and speak against the prejudices of 'mainstream society' against minorities, including the gay

and lesbian community.

He also spoke of the gracious Bangladeshi women who, with their children, attend the after-school club, where Rob and his team provide homework help, creative crafts and energetic games.

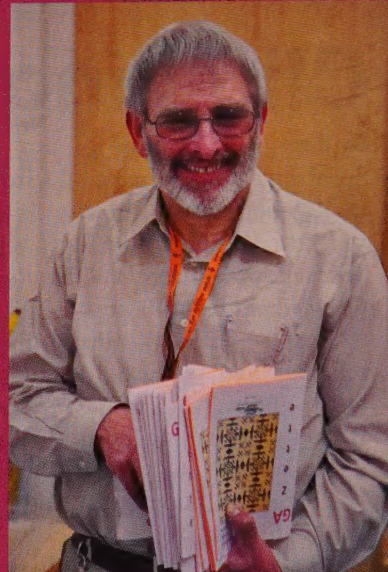
These second- and third-generation British Muslim women had the generosity of spirit to reach across the cultural divide to participate in the activity provided by the Bethnal Green Centre. Rob believes in a collaborative, non-patronising, approach where the simple gifts of human sharing are freely given and received.

Rob explained that there is much more work to do in developing the centre into a place which provides a full array of activities to meet the needs of the community but he is looking forward to the challenges ahead.

For more information about 'Simple Gifts', please visit [simplegiftsucsa.org.uk](http://simplegiftsucsa.org.uk)

*Anne Bodman is administrator of the Unitarian Women's Group.*





## General Assembly 2013, Nottingham



Clockwise from top left: Participants enjoyed singing together at the Anniversary Service; David Warhurst facilitated publishing of the GA-zette and also sold copies; Stella Burney staffed the Nightingale Centre's stand; this talented trio told the children's story at the Anniversary Service; Joan Cook was awarded her certificate as a Lay Preacher by GA President Lis Dyson-Jones; Executive Committee Convenor Martin Whitell consulted with teen delegates; Ministry Student Winnie Gordon shared a laugh with GA Operations Manager Andrew Mason; The 2013 GA Executive Committee took office; Bálint Benczédi Ferenc, Bishop of the United Hungarian Unitarian Church addressed the assembly; enjoying a workshop discussion.







Photos by John  
Newerdine





# Time to rethink policy on illicit drugs

By Bruce Chilton

Your Unitarian Penal Affairs Panel (PAP) has been working towards this Presentation at the General Assembly meetings for years. It started in earnest with the publishing in late 2009 of the PAP Issues Paper 10 "Illicit Drugs" and much information about the problems with drugs in the UK and other countries has gone to the Unitarian movement since.

At this year's GA, some 60 delegates came to the PAP Presentation "Illicit Drugs: Time to Rethink". The first address was by Dave Barrie CBE, a former diplomat and now the Chair of 'Make Justice Work',

He set out the facts in dreadful detail. In the 1960s, the few hundred British people addicted to opiates were treated quietly by their own doctors. In 1971, the number of registered opiate users in the UK was fewer than 500. But when many thousands of US soldiers returned home from the Vietnam War with addictions to drugs such as cocaine, heroin and cannabis. The drugs and their suppliers followed them to the west.

The lessons of the extraordinary boost in crime created by the prohibition of alcohol in the USA in the 1920s were forgotten. President Nixon began the 'War on Drugs', a new prohibition enforced by drastic criminal penalties, and drew in the allies of the USA. Other countries copied the US, and the UK enacted its Misuse of Drugs Act 1973. Soon, drug criminals appeared and by 1991 the estimated number of opiate users in the UK had risen to 50,000. But still the lessons of prohibition were ignored.

## Disastrous results

Despite the exertions of police and military, the results of drugs being imported into the UK have been disastrous. In 2012, it was estimated that more than 350,000 people in the UK are addicted to opiates and need regular 'fixes'. One in five families is affected. Yet the situation is getting worse. According to the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs a new drugs threat to the UK is 'legal highs'. At least 49 new drugs, some yet to be named – let alone banned – came into the UK in 2012.

'What to do?' asked Dave Barrie. Public opinion is moving rapidly. About 75% of the UK population recognises the War on Drugs has been lost. But the drugs conservatives and the drugs reformers cannot agree. Both sides want to reduce drugs' harm but are the answers even greater enforcement or even free marketing? The Home Office Select Committee,



At *The Inquirer* reception, Some enthusiastic readers proved what we suspected all along – most turn to the letters page first. No space for letters in this issue, but they will be back in the next issue. Photo by John Hewerdine



Bruce Chilton (left) and Tony Cann put forward the motion on drugs policy which was overwhelmingly approved. Photo by John Hewerdine

after an inquiry into drugs recommended in December 2012 that a Royal Commission find the most effective answers. The Government has declared that a Royal Commission or major public inquiry is unnecessary. The Deputy Prime Minister may consider "the UK is losing the War on Drugs on an industrial scale" but the Home Secretary considers it may yet be won.

In Dave Barrie's view, the conservatives and the reformers have to find 'mutual drug policies'. At present, the conservatives, including the Government, do not feel under sufficient threat to change their views. The public must be more informed and compel the opening of the debate. A Royal Commission into drugs is the obvious answer.

Our second speaker, Jane Slater, the Head of Operations at the Transform Drug Policy Foundation, gave details of how different approaches to drug reform had been applied in other countries. Conducting the War on Drugs "with increased vigour" was tried in Mexico. The result in the last six years has been more than 70,000 deaths and major civil disturbances. In a series of screen projections, Jane showed the extraordinary costs of the failure of the War on Drugs across the world. 'Cannabis warnings' and needle exchanges are incremental reforms at the edges of the problems. What is needed in the UK and elsewhere are reforms which reorientate drug controls away from criminal enforcement to a health-based approach and the decriminalisation of drug possession and use. A Royal Commission is a first step to finding and giving reliable, trusted information on drugs problems.

## Motion passed overwhelmingly

With the sponsorship of the FOY Society, PAP members proposed and seconded a motion for debate by the delegates. The motion called upon the Unitarians, as the first faith group in the UK to do so, to urge the Government to set up a Royal Commission on drugs without delay. The support from the delegates was overwhelming. The motion was passed with 154 votes for, 3 against and 1 abstention and became a Unitarian resolution.

How can you, your church, chapel or meeting help this social responsibility action by the General Assembly? The work of persuading other people, including politicians, that a Royal Commission into drugs is needed urgently is now underway. Your Penal Affairs Panel, with its special interest in how drugs contribute to crime and the exploding numbers of people in prisons, will continue. Will you please help?

Bruce Chilton is a member of the Unitarian General Assembly Penal Affairs Panel.